

The Essentials of Effective Hymn Playing

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Inspirational music is an essential part of our church meetings. The hymns invite the Spirit of the Lord, create a feeling of reverence, unify us as members, and provide a way for us to offer praises to the Lord.

Some of the greatest sermons are preached by the singing of hymns. Hymns move us to repentance and good works, build testimony and faith, comfort the weary, console the mourning, and inspire us to endure to the end.

Hymns can lift our spirits, give us courage, and move us to righteous action. They can fill our souls with heavenly thoughts and bring us a spirit of peace.

The First Presidency, Hymns, ix-x

Preparation

Prayerfully read and study the text. Note a few key words from each verse that you can use to help determine your registration plan.

It is the responsibility of the organist to study each hymn in advance to determine the appropriate tempo, rhythm, phrasing, registration, treatment of repeated notes, fingering, and pedaling.

Phrasing

Always determine the phrasing by reading the text. Communicate complete thoughts to your congregation. Look for punctuation marks and text meaning to determine where to phrase. Shorten the final note of the phrase by inserting a rest. Often, an eighth rest works well.

Fingering and Pedaling Plan

It is essential to take the time to plan and write in fingering and pedaling in your hymnal. As you make your plan, look for that which will use the most economy of motion. In addition to writing in finger numbers and pedal markings be sure to mark ties and common tones. In the long run having a good fingering/pedaling plan will save you time and help you have perfect legato.

Tempo

Selecting the right tempo is important. Consult the suggested metronome markings for the hymn. Consider the size of your congregation and the setting for which you are playing. Hymns with longer note values might call for a livelier tempo and those with shorter note values may require a little bit slower tempo. Hymns with a faster harmonic rhythm (the rate at which chords change) call for a more stately tempo, while those with a slower harmonic rhythm are often played more quickly.

Articulation

The standard for playing hymns is legato. Repeated notes need to be treated in a special manner. If two voices repeat, tie one voice. If three or more voices repeat, tie two voices. Mike Carson said it well:

Repeated Notes

The style for playing hymns is legato, but repeated notes in any voice, especially the soprano, must be played with clean, precise, rhythmic breaks. Playing repeated notes cleanly is a vital factor in solidifying the rhythmic pulse of the hymn. The habit of tying all repeated notes leads to weak, imprecise playing. However, as with everything in life, there are exceptions:

When to Tie and Not to Tie

Common Tones are shared repeated notes in succeeding voice parts (see illustration #1):

- Tie ascending common tones
- Do not tie descending common tones

Repeated Notes in the same voice part (see illustration #2):

- Never tie repeated notes in the soprano part.
- Tie repeated notes from strong to weak beats.
- Do not tie voice parts across bar lines, unless common tones are involved.
- Successive repeated notes in all four voices require special treatment to avoid sounding choppy (i.e #152 God Be with You 'Till We Meet Again).
 - In fast hymns tie one inner voice (usually Alto), while observing all the other rules.
 - In slower hymns tie both inner voices, while observing all the other rules.

Illustration #1: Common Tones

written

ascending descending

played

Illustration #2: Repeated Notes

written

There is a green hill far... a - way, with..

played

Registration

Registration refers to the selection of stops (sounds) to use. The organ must be strong enough to support and lead out but not so strong it overpowers the congregation. Two basic registrations for hymn singing are:

For meditative hymns: 8' & 4' principals; or modify to 8' principal & 4' flute

For jubilant hymns: 8, 4, & 2' principals (+mixture)

Pedal: Start with a 16' stop(s) & 8' principal and Great to Pedal and Swell to Pedal couplers as needed. Listen for balance between manual and pedals.

The standard is to make subtle registration changes between verses. Usually, this is the addition or subtraction of one or two stops.

Introduction

The hymn introduction reflects the spirit of the hymn and announces the tune, tempo, mood, style, and volume of the hymn. Play the introduction at the same tempo that the congregation will sing. Do not ritard at the end of the introduction. If the hymn is unfamiliar consider playing the hymn all the way through.

Practice

Practice slow enough to stay in control.

Begin by practicing each voice independently, followed by two-voice combinations, then three-voice combinations, and finally all voices together. Keep in mind that extra practice of left hand and pedal may be necessary to maintain independence.

Practice the introduction.

If making registration changes, practice redistributing the final chord of the hymn to one hand so that the other hand can make the change. Or, if making the change with a toe stud, practice doing that.

Practice the hymn in its entirety, from the introduction, through all the verses, with the registration changes.

Lastly, practice the hymn faster than you plan to play it. This will increase your confidence and help you in the event that the music director conducts faster than you had planned - or if your nerves run away with you!

Communicate with music director

Talk with the music director about the tempo and about how they plan to conduct the hymn. Also, it may be helpful to rehearse the hymn with the music director, especially if you have not worked with them before.